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### Teaching critical consumption of television through analysis of self-reflexive programming

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# TEACHING CRITICAL CONSUMPTION OF TELEVISION THROUGH ANALYSIS OF SELF-REFLEXIVE PROGRAMMING

Roger C. Aden

A useful approach to helping students become critical consumers of television programming is to teach them about the medium using self-reflexive television texts. Self-reflexivity is a growing trend in television (Feuer, 1987; Marc, 1984; Thorburn, 1987), located within the expanding postmodern tradition. According to Olson (1987), programs "can reflect on the medium of television . . . they can reflect on particular shows or particular genres of television . . . and they can reflect on their own textuality" (pp. 285-286). By referring to themselves, texts force viewers to confront their own understanding of their literacy because in reading the text they also are reading about the text; the artifice of the narrative is acknowledged. "As a consequence of this defamiliarizing experience, viewers are invited, perhaps even compelled, to renegotiate their understandings of the text, the genre and the medium of television" (Vande Berg, 1989, p. 13).

Exploring self-reflexive television requires students to understand relationships among text, genre, audience, and form. In so doing, students learn skills needed to become critical consumers of television: they appreciate the context surrounding the text (television audience expectations, genre), analyze the parts of the text (form, language), synthesize the parts for a greater comprehension of the whole (the television program), and evaluate how the synthesized parts mesh with their context. These skills can then be applied to other television programming. To illustrate how such an approach can enhance students' understanding of these relationships, I explore a self-reflexive episode of the sitcom *ALF* (Fusco, Bendetson, & Havinga, 1988).

ALF, an acronym for Alien Life Form, is a puppet-like creature from the planet Melmac who lives with the suburban Tanner family. Many of the plots concern ALF's adjustment to life on earth. Importantly, ALF is an avid television viewer who uses the medium's offerings to derive "motives for meeting situations" new to him (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1990, p. 7).

In the episode illustrated here, ALF's relationship with television has convinced him that life in the Tanner household is much more boring than the lives other people lead. Specifically, ALF is fascinated with the excitement he finds in the South Pacific with the castaways of the 1960's sitcom, *Gilligan's Island*. ALF decides to rectify his unpleasant situation by building a lagoon in the Tanner's backyard. Willie, the Tanner father, is less than fond of ALF's solution and orders him to return the yard to normal. While doing so, ALF falls asleep and finds himself, via a dream, on *Gilligan's Island*. He is joined by Gilligan, the

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skipper, the professor, and Mary Ann—all of whom are played by the original actors from the television series.

## UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT AND THE TEXTUAL LANGUAGE OF TELEVISION

Because television's popularity as a mass medium is due in part to its ability to produce stories that large audiences, or demographically desired audiences, find interesting, students begin to understand how television texts work when they comprehend the context within which the texts operate. Generally, television texts that appeal to audiences (a) recognize the need for *audience familiarity* with the text's language, and (b) attempt to fulfill the audience's desire to *escape from "reality."*

The concept of audience familiarity suggests that to understand and follow a program individuals must be acquainted with the medium and the genre (Morley, 1982). As Thorburn (1987, p. 637) points out: "most members of the TV audience have lived through the whole history of the medium. They know its habits, its formulas, its starts and its recurring character actors. . . ." Audience familiarity is especially important in self-reflexive sitcoms since "familiarity with the literature of television is necessary to recognize the parody" (Olson, 1987, p. 288).

When watching familiar sitcoms, audience members are motivated by their desire to identify with the characters and to escape through entertainment. Parke Levy, a former sitcom producer, says: "People want a mirror held up to life, but at an angle so that it's humorous" (cited in Mitz, 1983, p. 3). To meet Levy's requirements, a sitcom must first reflect in some way what is perceived as "reality." Fiske and Hartley (1978, p. 162) elaborate: "before we can be entertained by a comedy or police drama, we must first concede that the *mode* in which the fictional story is presented is *not* constructed, but is merely the natural representation of the way things are. . . ." At the same time that sitcoms reflect life they need to refract it. This provides the humor that allows audience members to escape from "reality" since escapism is "a central human characteristic" (Cawelti, 1976, p. 13).

The ALF episode not only makes note of the need for audience familiarity and escape from reality in sitcoms, it parodies the textual enactment of those needs repeatedly. Three interrelated devices that parody the representation of audience familiarity needs are employed: reflection, exaggeration, and violation.

*Reflection* occurs when the text of ALF mirrors the text of *Gilligan's Island*. ALF tells Willie, for example, that if he needs some excitement ALF knows just where to look. After Willie asks, "Where's that?" ALF replies: "Wherever you hear this song: Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip that started from a tropic port aboard this tiny ship. The mate was a mighty sailing man, the skipper brave and. . . ." As ALF's voice trails off a remix of the instrumental portion of the theme song from *Gilligan's Island* rises up to serve as a transition to the next scene. In fact, throughout the episode the musical transitions (except one) are versions of the *Gilligan's Island* theme song.

A second reflection of the original series occurs when ALF is told to dig by the skipper. ALF, like Gilligan used to, replies: "I'm not gonna dig. I refuse to dig. I won't dig. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't." Then, like Gilligan, ALF finds

himself doing exactly what he earlier refused. Not all reflection is so straightforward, however, much of it is exaggerated to emphasize the parody.

In the *Gilligan's Island* series the skipper frequently took off his cap and hit Gilligan with it when his first mate committed one of his many blunders. The *ALF* episode *exaggerates* this habit as the skipper repeatedly hits Gilligan with his cap. Even the professor borrows the cap to whack Gilligan once. The exaggerated sound of the cap hitting Gilligan, coupled with ALF's louder than usual guffaws to these exaggerated nonverbal gestures, further reinforces the overplayed nature of the text.

Another example of exaggeration concerns the use of trickery to get Gilligan to perform some deed. ALF, too, seems familiar with the use of tricks to get out of work when he attempts to convince daughter Lynn Tanner to fill in the hole he dug for the lagoon. However, ALF's trickery is exaggerated to such an extent that Lynn's refusal is no surprise since few people would consider ALF's offer to "shovel a couple metric tons" seriously, especially when he terms it "the thrill of backbreaking manual labor." After Lynn refuses, ALF moans: "Gilligan would have fallen for that," a reflection acknowledging exaggeration.

Occasionally, the joke is not on Gilligan or ALF but on the audience through a *violation* of expectations. In the *Gilligan's Island* episodes, both the audience and Gilligan expected his character to (a) receive physical and verbal abuse and (b) respond to it with silence. Thus, after Gilligan is whacked with the skipper's cap and ALF jumps in with the gleeful comment, "I never get tired of this!," we do not expect Gilligan's reply, a dejected, "I get tired of it."

Another expectation of *Gilligan's Island* audiences is that the professor will be able to manufacture anything needed for the castaways' survival. Therefore, when the group sits down to watch their island-made television groans of disbelief were probably not heard. Until, that is, Gilligan replies to the professor's comment that he is adjusting the vertical hold: "Vertical hold? Looks like a coconut to me." Gilligan's comment draws attention to the taken-for-granted of that series. In so doing, he violates audience expectations.

Much of the discussion in *ALF* about television centers on the title character's inability to separate reality from television. For him, television is much more exciting, an attitude with which Willie has difficulty. As he tells ALF near the beginning of the episode: "ALF, I'm not going to waste my time trying to analyze why you find real life more boring than some ludicrous situation comedy." ALF, however, remains unconvinced and proceeds to build the backyard lagoon, satisfied when he is finished that "from now on life around here will be much more exciting." Even Willie's insistence that the yard be repaired fails to budge ALF from his beliefs. He simply tells Willie: "Fine. Fine. If that's what you want I'll turn this land of adventure back into dullsville."

However, in keeping with the sitcom tradition of dreams clarifying the confused, ALF's visit to *Gilligan's Island* convinces him that life there is not any more exciting than in his own home. The turning point comes when the castaways and ALF sit down to watch a television program based upon the Tanner family. Befuddled by the castaways laughter at what he considers mundane, ALF asks for an explanation of what is so funny. Mary Ann's answer reflects the motivation for watching sitcoms: "They can do things we only dream of." Thus, after awakening, ALF gives Willie his new outlook on life: "Well,

listen, I was wrong. Adventure isn't on some uncharted desert isle. It's right here in your own backyard." Of course, a sitcom cannot violate expectations too far by concluding that real life is superior to the life it presents; so, in the final scene of the episode ALF switches genres and turns the backyard into a set from *Bonanza*.

When students understand the self-reflexive references in this episode of *ALF* they become more critical consumers of television. Their appreciation for the context surrounding a text grows when audience literacy and audience desire to escape from reality are isolated. Meanwhile, the process of isolating those contextual influences provides practice for their analytic skills. Understanding how those two influences are textually represented in a program improves their skills of synthesis. And, evaluating the textualization of those influences teaches critical lessons that can be carried to the criticism of other television programming.

### UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT AND THE TEXTUAL FORM OF TELEVISION

Audience familiarity and the escapist nature of sitcoms can attract an audience and provide inspirations for parody, but they—along with the very nature of television—also impose several constraints on television form. First, audience familiarity creates a situation in which plot patterns are readily recognizable. As Marc (1984, pp. 12–13) aptly notes: "From about the time a viewer reaches puberty, sitcom plot is painfully predictable." Second, time constraints can occur in a sitcom: time either does not pass or passes very slowly in sitcoms; to do otherwise would be to change the situation, or premise, of the program. Newcomb (1974, p. 37) explains: "What [sitcom characters] lack, or what they refuse to recognize is a knowledge of the order of the world." Third, since sitcoms are situation-based and limited by the size of television screens, there is a constraint of space. "It is a narrative necessity of situation comedy that the 'situation' remain unchanged. If the program is to be repeated week after week, the characters and their mode of interaction must not be allowed to evolve" (Atallah, 1984, p. 239).

Understanding these constraints on the form of a television text provides students with further contextual understanding, a different analytical experience, an example of a second form of textual synthesis, and new opportunities for evaluation.

The first constraint on which *ALF* comments is *plot predictability*. The castaways of *Gilligan's Island* never leave the island during the series, usually because of a foul-up caused by Gilligan. The recognizable plot pattern of "hope for rescue/Gilligan blunders" is parodied by the characters of both shows. For instance, when ALF barges in to the master bedroom to capsulize the latest rerun of *Gilligan's Island*, Willie tells ALF the ending to the episode before ALF recites it. Asks ALF in disbelief: "Did I give the ending away somewhere?" Willie replies in measured words: "That's how every episode ends. They never leave the island." A confused ALF responds: "Well, I must have overlooked the pattern." Later, when ALF is introduced to Mary Ann on the island, she asks no one in particular: "How come everybody can get to this island and none of us can ever get off?" Gilligan answers: "Really? I must have overlooked the pattern." The

consistent, predictable plotting of the individual series is not the only constraint parodied by *ALF*—the management of television time also is targeted.

In real time, the castaways have been marooned since 1964, the year the series first aired. In television time, however, time is either slow moving or, as is often the case in sitcoms, frozen because it is not mentioned. In the *ALF* episode, the castaways sport the same clothes they wore throughout the run of their series, behave the same way (except for exaggerations), and live in the same place. Ostensibly, nothing has changed. To the castaways, however, time has passed in real terms and they are tired, bored, and bitter. They are “sick” of coconut cream pies, mangoes, and making dental floss. As Mary Ann points out: “We’re bored. You know we’ve been doing the same thing day in and day out for 23 years.” Even the good-natured Gilligan gets fed up when the skipper calls him “little buddy” for the umpteenth time: “Will you stop calling me ‘little buddy.’ I’m in my forties for crying out loud.” Perhaps part of the reason the castaways are fed up is because they have nowhere to go—they are also constrained by space because they live in a sitcom.

*ALF* discovers the hazards of being trapped in the limited *space* of the island when he asks Gilligan what viewers have probably wondered over the years: “Hey Gilligan, tell me something. Mary Ann is really cute. How come you never asked her out?” Gilligan’s answer destroys the illusion of reality by pointing out the lack of space on the sitcom: “Where would we go?” Eventually, *ALF*, too, comes to realize how space constraints affect what happens in a sitcom: “I thought this place would be fun. Now I realize—it’s only fun in half hour chunks.” Thus, space is also limited by another dimension of time: the hands of the clock. Trapped by the top and bottom of the hour, *ALF* and the castaways lament their inability to move outside of their respective programs. *ALF*, however, is able to break the barriers because he is supposedly not in a television show like the castaways. The *ALF* episode draws additional attention to space constraints by breaking them in its movement between programs within a program, a process White (1986) terms “diegetic mixing.” Diegetic mixing, which White (1986, p. 56) says is increasingly frequent on prime-time television, is especially adept at space-breaking because “the world of television’s individual fictions is brought together as parts of a larger, continuous imaginary world.”

The discussion of sitcom constraints on *ALF* illustrates for students that in many instances the constraints work *for* the program; if the pattern, time, and space changed, the program would likely lose some of its appeal. Analysis and synthesis of these formal constraints on television programming point to contextual influences on television generally and offer perspectives for critically evaluating specific television texts. For example, students can bring the lessons learned from *ALF* (or other programming) to a longitudinal exploration of how the aging of children in sitcoms affects other elements of the programs’ texts.

## CONCLUSION

Other television texts that feature diegetic mixing and self-reflexive techniques can teach the lessons found in this *ALF* episode. For example, Danny Thomas, during his *Make Room for Daddy* days, spent time in Andy Griffith’s Mayberry, and George Burns talked directly to the audience in *The Burns and Allen Show* while he participated in the program’s events. Both programs periodically

appear on cable channels. The Lifetime cable network sometimes shows episodes of *Moonlighting*, one of the most self-reflexive series ever to appear on television (Vande Berg, 1989). *ALF* reruns are now syndicated to local television stations. *Saturday Night Live* features self-reflexive skits on both its contemporary episodes and on those appearing on the Nickolodeon cable network. The lessons learned through exploration of these self-reflexive television texts—contextual appreciation, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—can provide students with the skills needed to become critical consumers of television and other forms of communication.

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